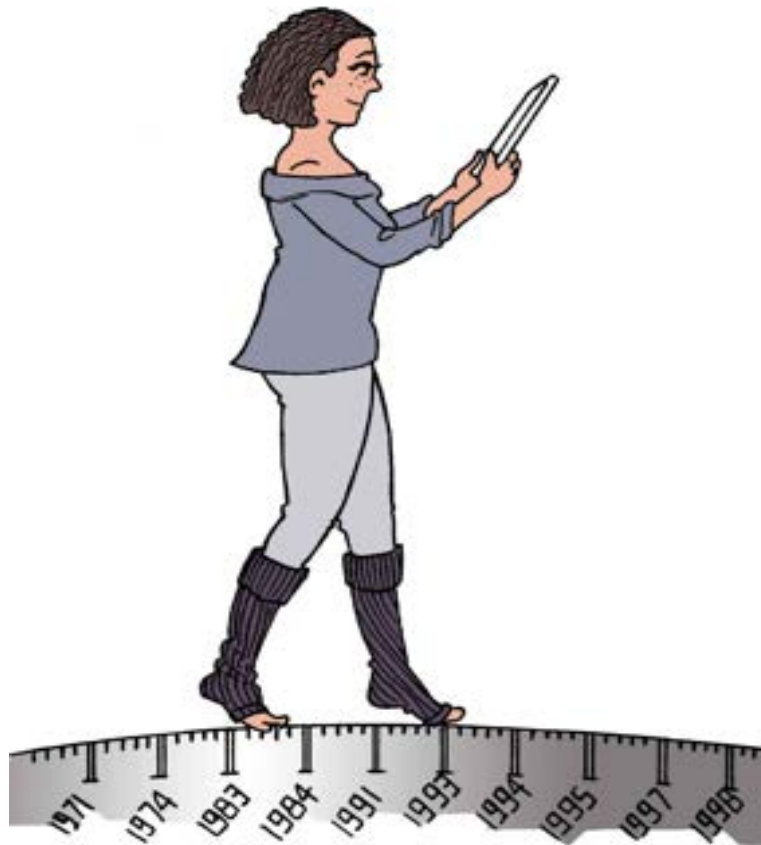


# A short history of ebooks in 20 drawings



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## 0. A virtual exhibition

This virtual exhibition covers ebooks in all their aspects: free ebooks, commercial ebooks, digital libraries, online bookstores, online publishers, digital formats, reading software, smartphones, e-readers, tablets, dictionaries, encyclopedias, novel projects, and more.

Here is the [corresponding ebook](#) in the Community Texts of the Internet Archive for further information.

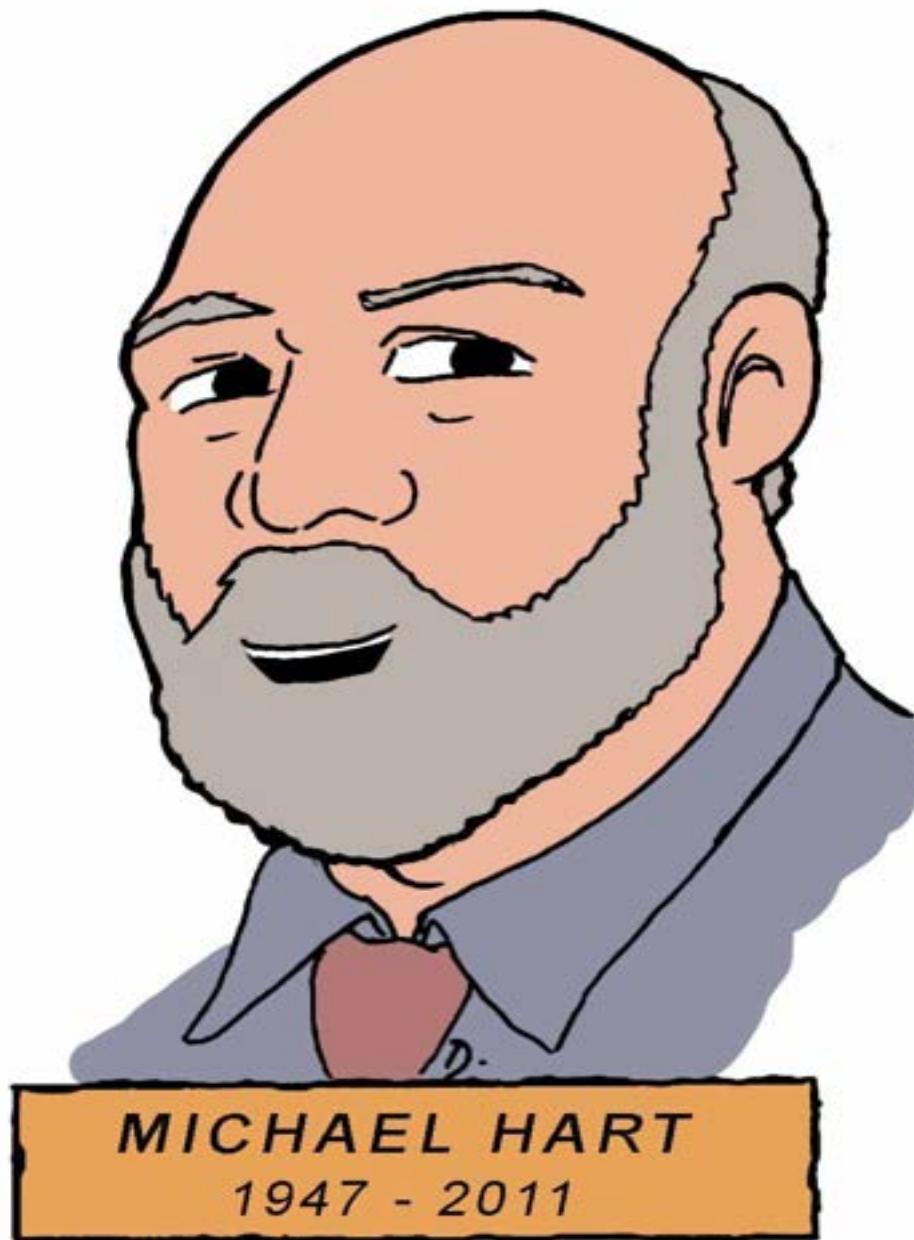
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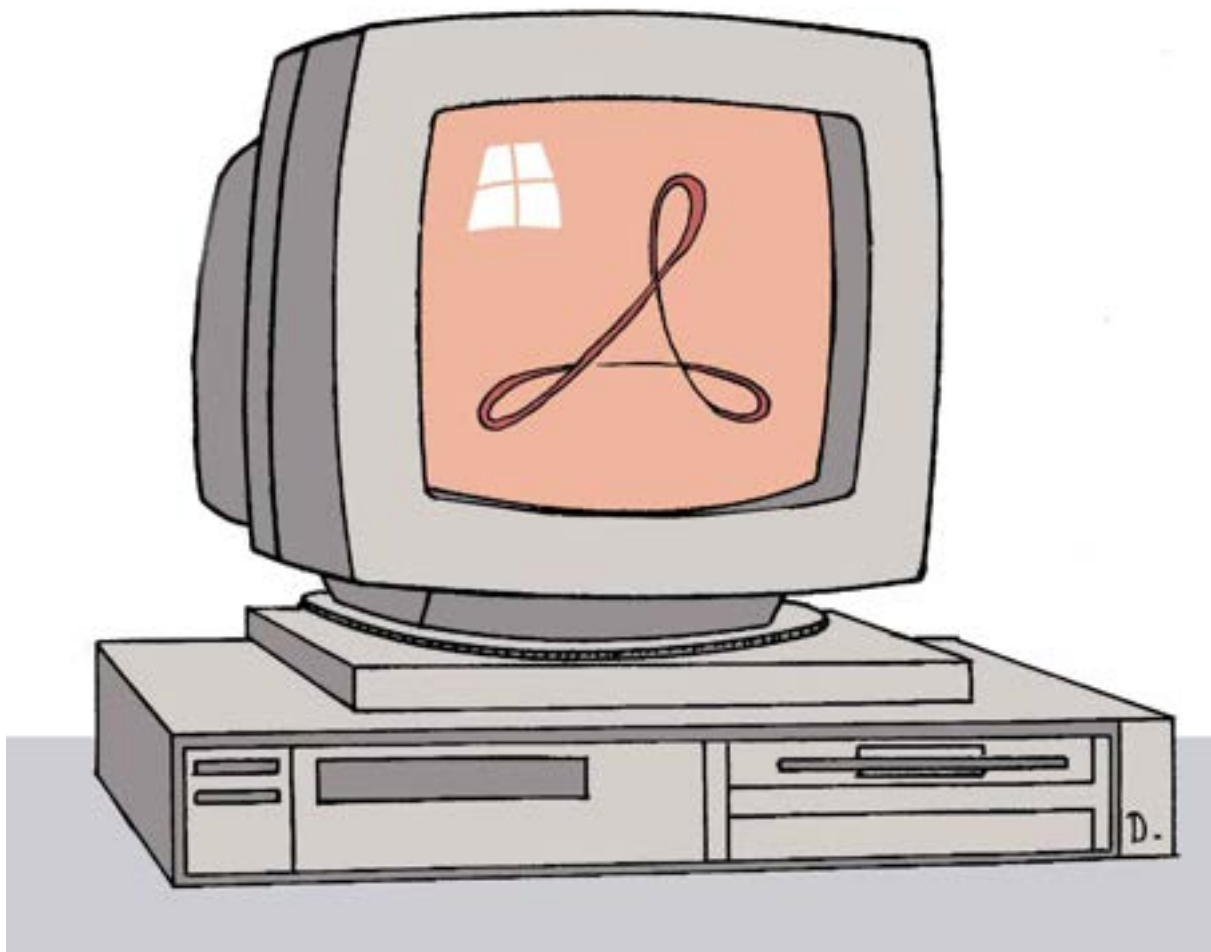
## 1. Project Gutenberg, a visionary project

The first ebook was eText #1 of Project Gutenberg, founded in July 1971 by Michael Hart to create and distribute free electronic versions of literary works from public domain. Project Gutenberg offered more than 65,000 ebooks in 60 languages in July 2021, with tens of thousands of downloads per day. Many ebooks were digitised and proofread twice by the volunteers of Distributed Proofreaders.



## 2. A quote by Michael Hart

"We consider etext to be a new medium, with no real relationship to paper, other than presenting the same material, but I don't see how paper can possibly compete once people each find their own comfortable way to etexts, especially in schools."  
(Michael Hart, founder of Project Gutenberg and inventor of ebooks, interviewed in August 1998)



### 3. PDF, a pioneer format created by Adobe

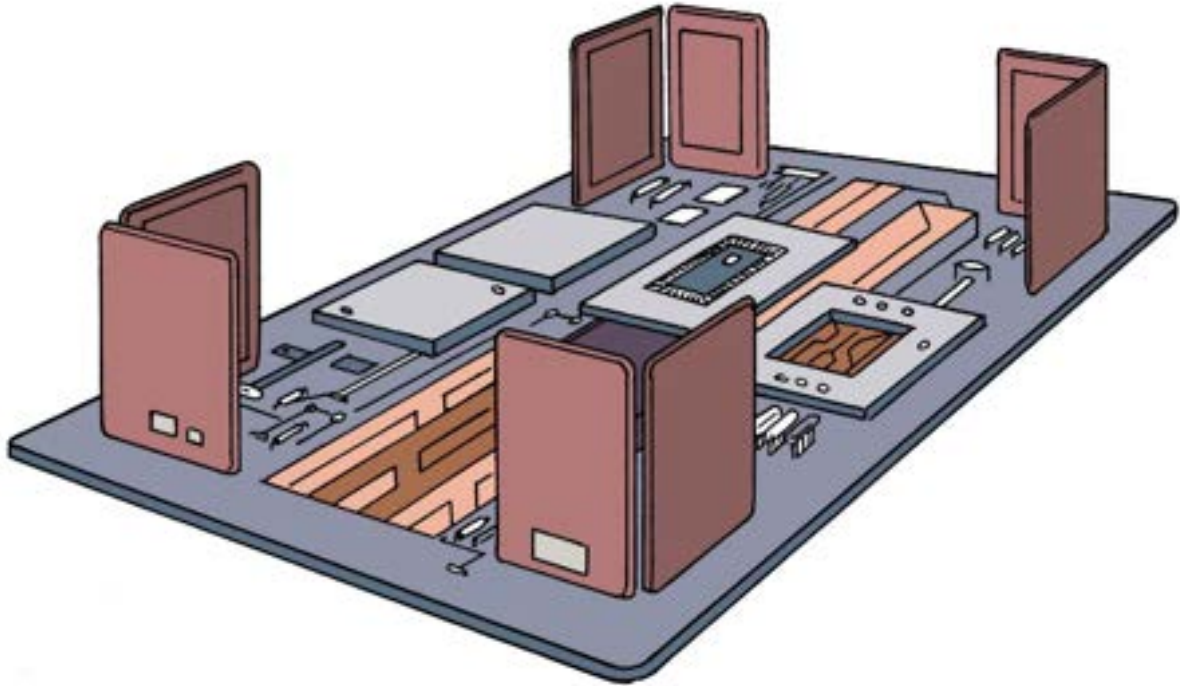
From California, Adobe created the PDF (Portable Document Format) in June 1993, along with Acrobat Reader (free, to read PDFs) and Adobe Acrobat (for a fee, to make PDFs). According to Adobe, PDF "lets you capture and view robust information from any application, on any computer system and share it with anyone around the world." PDF became the first standard format for ebooks.





#### 4. Gabriel, a web portal for European national libraries

Gabriel -- an acronym for "Gateway and Bridge to Europe's National Libraries" -- was created in January 1997 as a trilingual web portal (English, French, German) giving access to the internet services of the participating libraries. Gabriel merged in summer 2005 with the European Library (created in January 2004) to offer a common portal for the 43 European national libraries. The European digital library Europeana was created three years later, in November 2008.



## 5. Gallica, the digital library of the French National Library

Gallica, the digital library of the French National Library (Bibliothèque nationale de France -- BnF), was inaugurated in October 1997 with a collection of digitised texts and images from the French 19th century, "the century of modern publishing and the modern press, the century of novels and major historical and philosophical works, and the century of scientific and technical discoveries". Gallica quickly became one of the largest digital libraries in the world.



## 6. From PDAs to smartphones

There were 17 million PDAs and only 100,000 e-readers worldwide in April 2001, according to a Seybold Report. The main PDAs were the Palm Pilot (launched by Palm in March 1996) and the Pocket PC (launched by Microsoft in March 2000), followed by the PDAs of Sony, Hewlett-Packard and others. People began buying smartphones instead of PDAs. The first smartphone was Nokia 9210 (launched by Nokia in 2001), long before the iPhone (launched by Apple in June 2007).





## 7. The first e-readers

The first e-readers were the Rocket eBook (NuvoMedia) and the SoftBook Reader (Softbook Press) in 1998, followed by the Gemstar eBook (Gemstar) in 2000 and the Cybook (Cytale) in 2001. New readers with E Ink (electronic ink) displays were for example the LIBRie (Sony) in April 2004, the Sony Reader (Sony) in September 2006, the Kindle (Amazon) in November 2007 and the Nook (Barnes & Noble) in November 2009.



## 8. E Ink, an electronic ink technology

Researchers of the Media Lab of MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) founded the company E Ink in April 1997 to develop an electronic ink technology. The prototype of a screen for e-readers was ready in 2002. The first E Ink screens in 2004 gave "an excellent reading experience close to that of real paper, making it very easy going on the eyes" (Michael Cook, editor of [epubBooks.com](http://epubBooks.com)). The next steps will be foldable screens and the electronic paper.



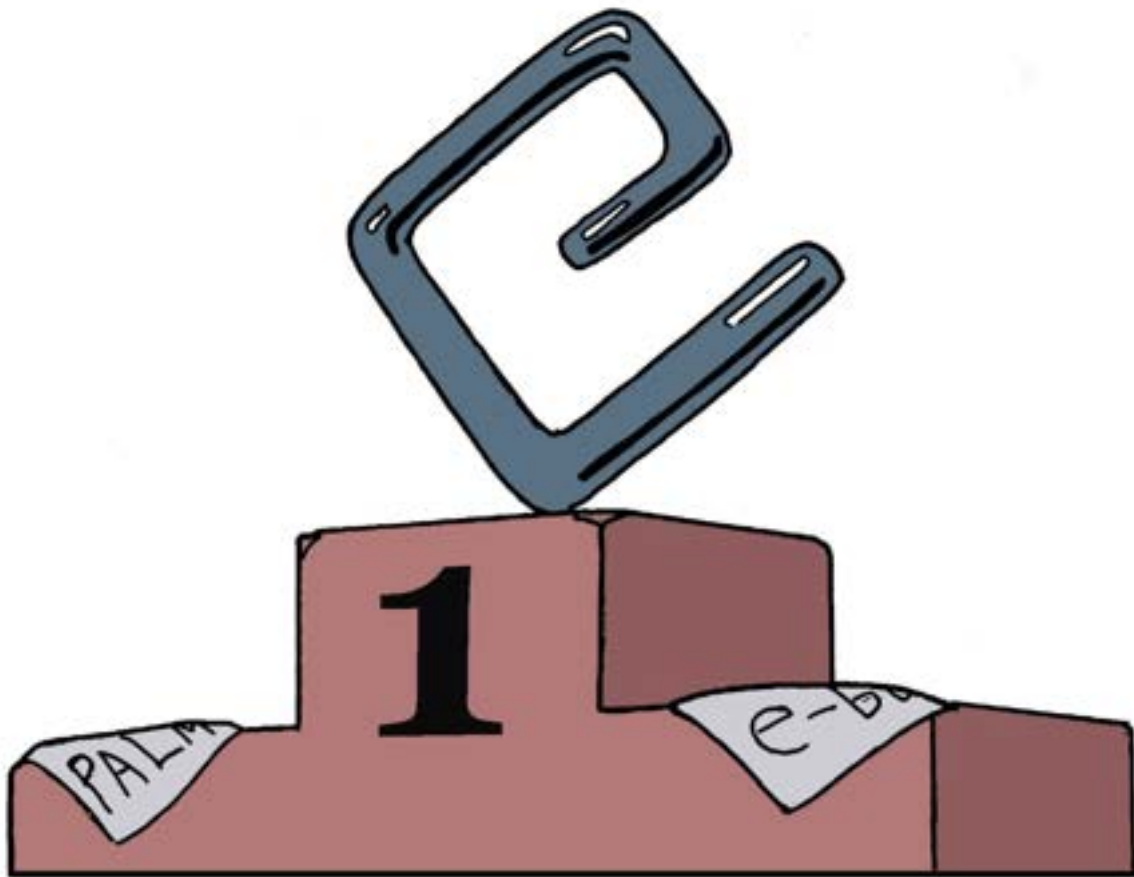
## 9. Online dictionaries and encyclopedias

The first online reference works in 1999 were the digital counterparts of their printed editions, for example Merriam-Webster Online and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) for online dictionaries, and Britannica.com (the website of Encyclopaedia Britannica) for online encyclopedias. Reference works were then created directly for the web, for example WordReference.com for language dictionaries.



## 10. Experiments by bestselling authors

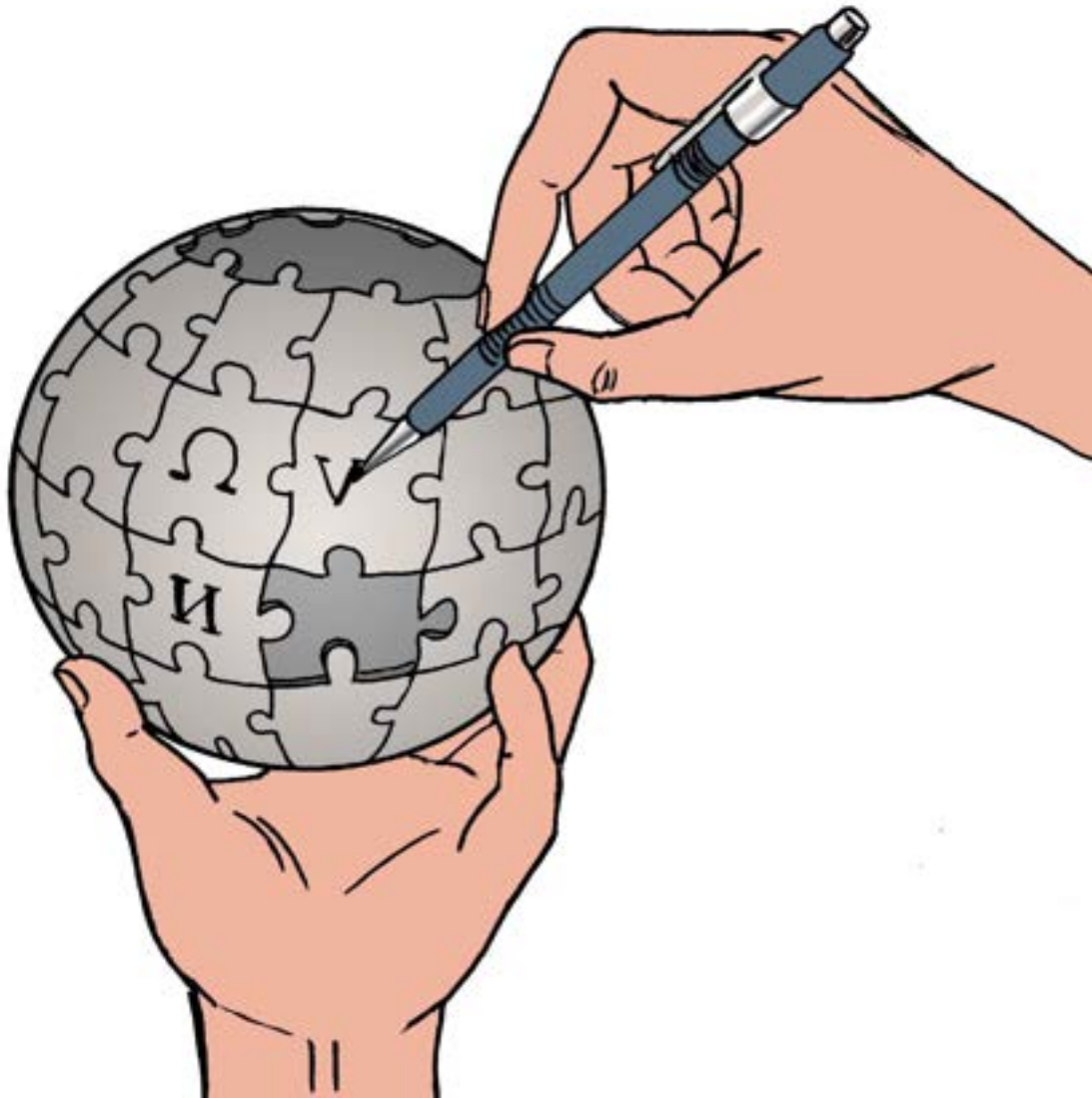
Stephen King was the first best-selling author to self-publish an epistolary novel on a dedicated website in 2000. This first experience was not a commercial success but it paved the way for a new economic model. Stephen King released his next ebooks with his publisher. He was followed by Frederick Forsyth in the United Kingdom, Arturo Pérez-Reverte in Spain and Paolo Coelho in Brazil.



## 11. From OeB to EPUB as a standard format

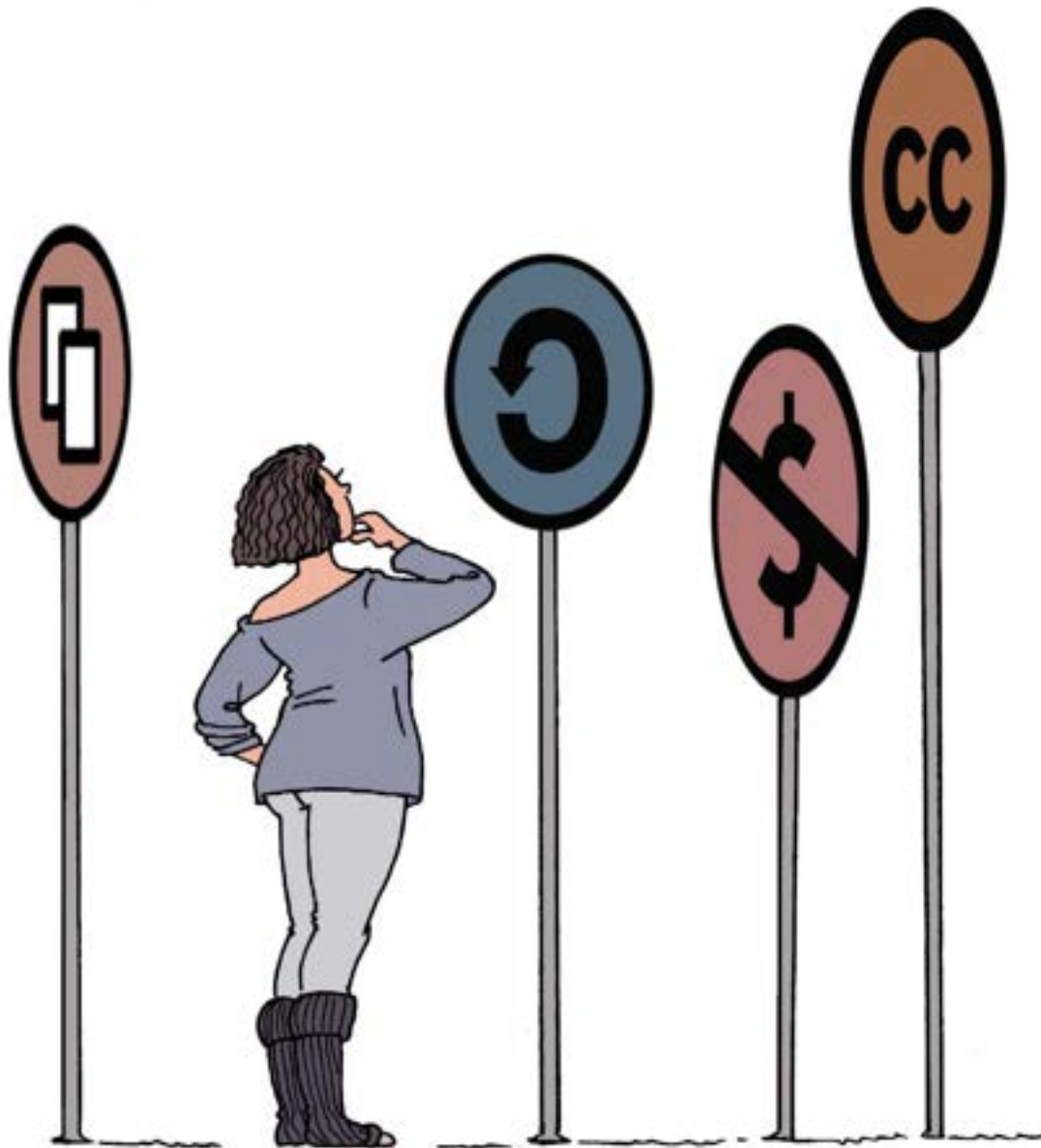
After many formats were created for each e-reader and reading software, the OeB (Open eBook) format was released by the Open eBook Forum (OeBF) in 1998 as a standard for ebooks. In 2005, the Open eBook Forum (OeBF) was replaced with the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF), and OeB was replaced with EPUB ("Electronic PUblication"). EPUB became the standard format for ebooks.





## 12. Wikipedia, an encyclopedia for the world

Wikipedia was created in January 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger as a global free collaborative online encyclopedia. Wikipedia quickly became the largest reference website, with thousands of people contributing worldwide. The articles and illustrations (images, pictures, maps, graphs) stay the property of their authors, and can be freely used under a licence Creative Commons BY-SA (Attribution - ShareAlike).



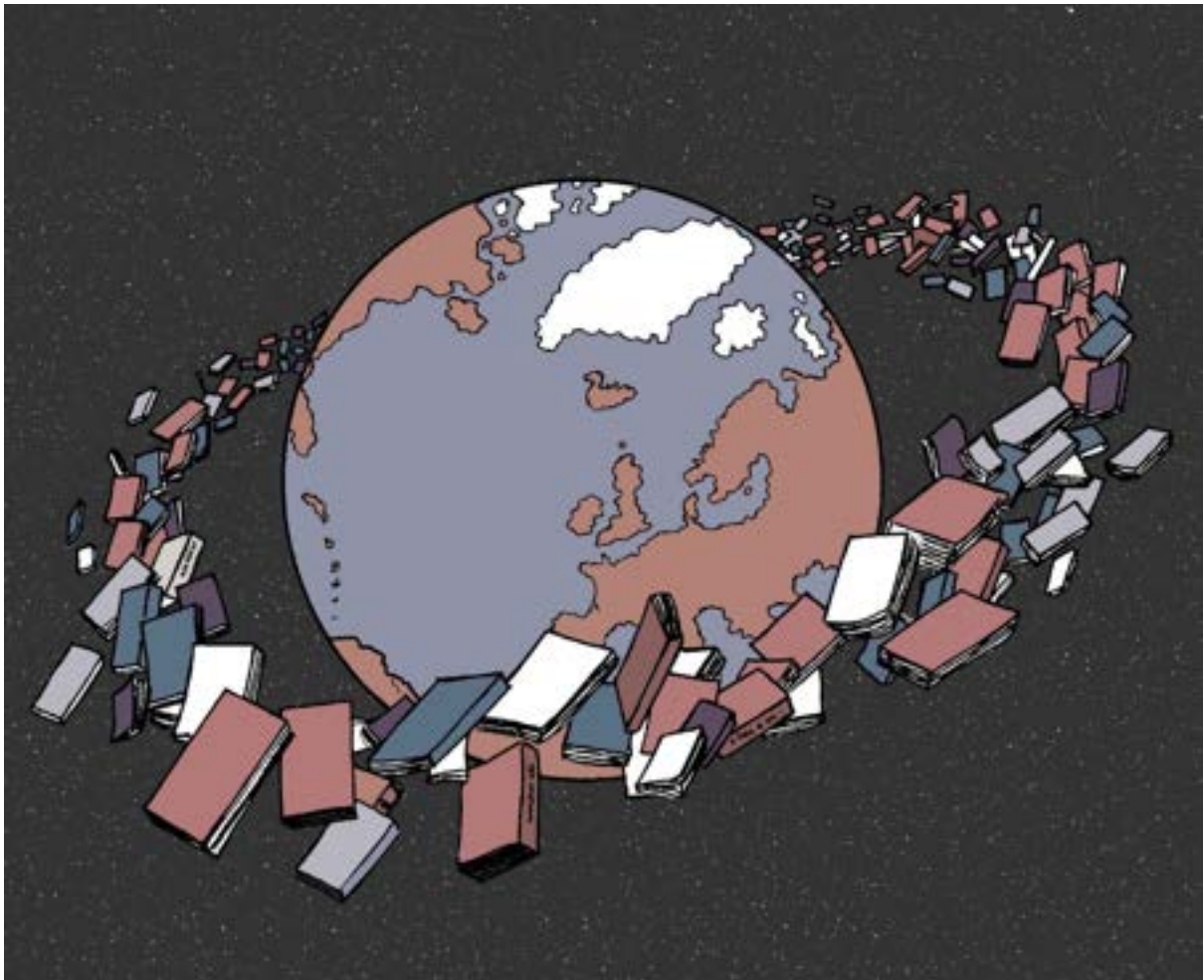
## 13. The Creative Commons licence

Founded in 2001 by Lawrence “Larry” Lessig, Creative Commons is “a nonprofit corporation dedicated to making it easier for people to share and build upon the work of others, consistent with the rules of copyright. We provide free licences and other legal tools, so others can share, remix, use commercially, or any combination thereof.” More than 2 billion works were distributed under a Creative Commons licence in 2021.



## 14. From Google Print to Google Books

Google created Google Print in May 2005 (for three months) and Google Books in August 2006 to digitise the collections of many partner libraries, despite lawsuits from the Authors Guild and the Association of American Publishers (AAP) relating to the digitisation of copyrighted books. Google invoked “fair use” all along to be able to offer free extracts of copyrighted books. Google won the lawsuits in October 2015 after a lengthy judicial saga.



## 15. The Internet Archive, a library for the world

The Internet Archive was founded in April 1996 by Brewster Kahle in San Francisco, California, as an “internet library” to store an archive of the internet every two months. The Wayback Machine was launched In October 2001 to be able to see the past versions of any website. The Internet Archive also became "a nonprofit digital library dedicated to providing universal access to human knowledge" with the help of many partners.



## 16. eBooks seen by a pioneer

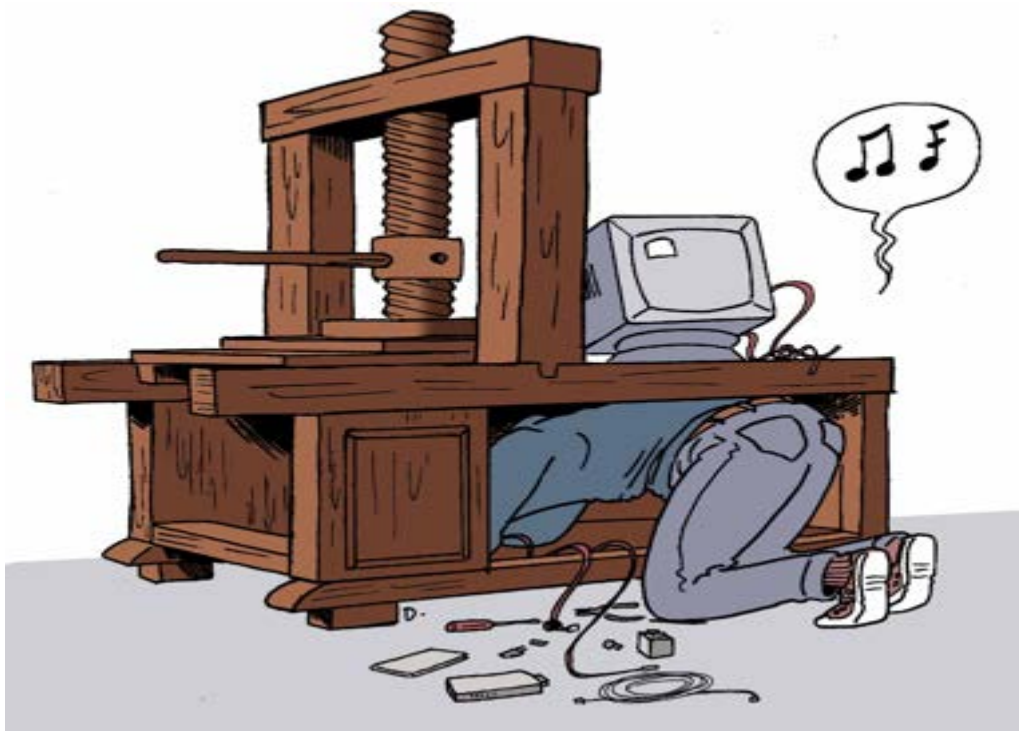
"I see the ebook of the future as a 'full work' putting together text, sound, images, video and interactivity: a new way to design, and write, and read, perhaps on a single book, constantly renewed, which would contain everything we have read, a single and multiple companion. Utopian? Improbable? Maybe not that much!"  
(Nicolas Pewny, consultant in electronic publishing, interviewed in February 2003)





## 17. A tribute to librarians

What would we do without librarians? Both traditional and digital libraries are extensively covered by the media, but what about all the librarians who have worked there -- especially librarians in small or underfunded libraries? Librarians have embraced ebooks alongside printed books despite a workload that is heavier by the day.



## 18. Thanks

Thank you to Denis Renard for his drawings.

Thank you to all those who answered my questions over the years.

Thank you to the Internet Archive for its Community Texts available to all.

Thank you to Project Gutenberg for providing us with more than 65,000 free ebooks in more than 60 languages for its 50th anniversary.

Thank you to Distributed Proofreaders for assisting in the task of providing high-quality ebooks.

Thank you to all the librarians around the world.

Thank you to all the professional translators, who are often forgotten.

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